

Falwell's beliefs damaged America

CYNTHIA TUCKER
SYNDICATED COLUMNIST



By the time of his death last week, Jerry Falwell had become a caricature, a victim of his egomania and verbal excesses. The organization he founded in 1979, the Moral Majority, had long since disbanded and his name had become associated with right-wing dogma. He will be remembered as much for his ridiculous pronouncements — such as blaming gays and feminists, among others, for the 9/11 attacks — as for anything else.

Nevertheless, his influence on American politics has, sadly, been profound. He and his fellow theorists have created a climate of intolerance for diversity, distrust of science, and disrespect for the wall of separation between church and state. Thomas Jefferson would weep for the republic he helped to birth.

Falwell was among a handful of ambitious activists who saw the potential in marrying the Republican Party to ultraconservative Christianity, an alliance that magnified the influence of the South in national politics and boosted the fortunes of a born-again governor named George W. Bush.

Ascendant Christian conservatives forced traditional Republicans — those who believed in a more circumspect government that stayed out of adults' bedrooms as well as their pockets — to swallow their principles. The Grand Old Party is now hostage to a group of flat-earthers who deny evolution, mock gays, denounce stem cell research, suspect contraceptives and believe all Muslims are going to hell. Indeed, some of them actually want a conflagration in the Middle East because they believe it will hasten the Second Coming of Christ.

And that's not all. When Bush ascended to the White House, he allowed loyalty to him and to Christian fundamentalism to dominate the hiring process. Competence no longer matters. Neither do top-notch educational credentials and expertise.

Graduates of fundamentalist Christian institutions, especially Falwell's Liberty University and Robertson's Regent University, have been given free rein. (Well-respected but less dogmatic universities founded with a Christian mission, such as Notre Dame, are suspect.) Regent law school graduate Monica Goodling — who recently resigned from the Justice Department because of her central role in the burgeoning scandal there — was given broad control over hiring attorneys, despite her limited experience.

In his book "Imperial Life in the Emerald City," Washington Post reporter Rajiv Chandrasekaran wrote that similar loyalty tests were used in the hiring process for those charged with rebuilding Iraq. Two applicants told Chandrasekaran they were asked their views on Roe v. Wade. Given those priorities, the reconstruction process was doomed from the start.

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Our Opinion

Unfinished Business

There's still work to do in reforming harsh Rockefeller drug laws

The 34th anniversary of the Rockefeller drug laws passed this month without fanfare.

Yet the more than 15,000 mostly African-American and Hispanic offenders incarcerated under some of the harshest drug laws in the land would surely have liked someone to notice. Too many non-violent drug offenders remain imprisoned under laws that in some cases require stiffer penalties for possessing small amounts of cocaine than for committing rape or manslaughter.

And although almost every political leader, past and present (including those who drafted the lock-em-up-and-throw-away-the-key statutes in 1973), believes the laws are archaic, the momentum for change seems to have slowed considerably. Three years ago, the Drop the Rock campaign by celebrities such as hip-hop mogul Russell Simmons, and other efforts from lawmakers and advocacy groups like the Drug Policy Alliance, brought some changes, but they didn't go far enough.

Under the reforms, which were

further amended in 2005, some drug offenders with Class I and II felonies could apply for resentencing, which could make them eligible for release. Some sentence times were shortened. But many non-violent drug offenders did not benefit from the changes, and Gov. Pataki and legislative leaders agreed that the reforms were only a first step.

The Assembly seems motivated to continue the work. Last month, it passed more reforms, including the much-needed provision that gives judges discretion in sentencing, which would allow them to send non-violent offenders to drug

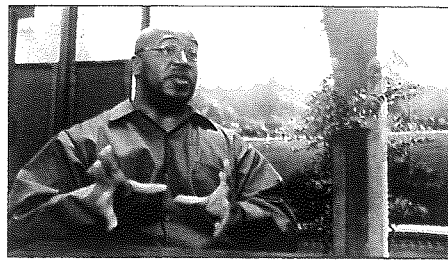
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But the Senate, which had resisted drug law changes for so long, has not moved on the issue. Some critics have suggested the Senate doesn't want to change the laws because Upstate communities would lose some of their prison populations, which are included in Census counts. Communities with lower Census counts could face redistricting.

It is doubtful that senators are that callous or calculating. But whatever their reasons, they have not been pushing the reforms.

The Senate and Gov. Eliot Spitzer, who has backed drug law reform, need to re-engage in this effort. It would also be nice to hear Attorney General Andrew Cuomo's voice on this issue: he has a history of fighting for the cause.

Next year, there should be no 35th anniversary commemoration of drug laws that have punished some non-violent offenders more than child rapists and killers.



File photo / Al Campanie, 2002
DARNELL BRANDON, serving 20 years to life at Auburn Correctional Facility for cocaine possession, sent money to Syracuse's Samaritan Center from his pay making license plates. The center helped him when he was released last year as a result of reforms.

Consider This

Outlook once was good

A little over a year ago, there were high hopes for B.G. Sulzle, the surgical manufacturer in Salina, now due to close within the next 18 months.

In February 2006, Angiotech Pharmaceuticals Inc., of Vancouver, British Columbia, announced it was purchasing the company that employs 200 people. No layoffs were planned. "Angiotech has intellectual property related to pharmaceuticals, and they want to marry it with medical devices," said David Sheridan, Sulzle's controller. "They think there is a competitive advantage to be had there. Our position here is it's a real positive event."

But on Wednesday, former CEO Robert Pietrafesa said Sulzle, which employed 700 people in its heyday, was closing. The company's plant manager would not comment, and an employee said workers were instructed not to talk, either.

What a difference a year makes. Unfortunately, not a positive difference for employees, or the area.

Anyone can win a gun!

The Bloomberg Gun Giveaway in Virginia has hit a snag.

It was billed as a reaction to New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg's campaign to curb the "straw purchase" of firearms for criminals in lax gun-control states. New York City sued two dozen gun dealers in Virginia and four other states after undercover agents filled out the required forms and bought weapons for their undocumented companions. This is how many guns end up in the wrong hands in places like New York City.

A pro-gun group called the Virginia Citizens Defense League announced it would give a raffle ticket for every \$100 a customer spends at gun dealers in Richmond and Danville. Two lucky winners would receive a free handgun and rifle.

Enter the state of Virginia, saying the raffle is illegal — unless the raffle tickets are handed out without requiring a purchase.

At last report, the Defense League had postponed the original stunt, but would proceed with a new, wide-open gun raffle. Stay tuned for the results.

The 'greenest' of them all

Elet and John Callahan's "green house" beside Skaneateles Lake in Spaford was not built to raise hothouse flowers. Architect Andy Ramsgard and builder Kevin Stack had something else in mind: to create the most environmentally advanced house in New York state.

They succeeded: The U.S. Green Building Council recently gave the Callahans' house New York's only "gold" rating — one of only four in the nation.

The house is something of a demonstration project, with its soy-based insulation, in-floor radiant heat, recycled glass shower tiles; cabinets made of wheat-straw boards and concrete foundations using recycled fly ash. The heating and cooling systems are rated 94 percent efficient. The builder lovingly preserved tall maple trees around the house.

It may still cost a bit more to build a house like the Callahans' than conventional structures. But the price is coming down as other builders catch the "green bug." Syracuse's Center for Excellence in Environmental and Energy Systems and affiliated Central New York enterprises are poised to lead the way.

Will France let go of entitlement mentality?

GEORGE WILL
SYNDICATED COLUMNIST



Arson is a form of commentary favored by the French left, so at least 1,000 vehicles were torched by disappointed

supporters of the Socialist presidential candidate Segolene Royal after she was defeated 53-47 by Nicolas Sarkozy. Last spring, rioting was the left's economic argument when the government proposed, then retreated from, legislation that would have made it somewhat easier for businesses to fire younger workers in the first two years of employment. The idea behind the legislation was that employers would be more likely to hire workers if it were not a legal ordeal to fire them. The rioters were, of course, mostly young.

France's unemployment rate is 8.7 percent, nearly double the U.S. rate of 4.5 percent. Among persons under age 25, a cohort that supported Royal, the rate is 21.2 percent, and is apt to stay there unless Sarkozy can implement reforms that irritate rioters.

Sarkozy has a mandate from an 84 percent turnout. Seen, however, in the flickering glow of smoldering Peugeot's, his chances of fundamentally reforming France seem fragile, and his idea of fundamental reform — he remains an ardent protectionist — seems pallid. Nevertheless, his attempt merits Americans' attention because he is confronting, in an especially virulent form, a problem that is becoming more acute here: the cultural contradictions of the welfare state.

Two decades ago, the sociologist Daniel Bell wrote about "the cultural contradictions of capitalism" to express this worry: Capitalism flourishes because of virtues that its flourishing undermines. Its success requires thrift, industriousness and deferral of gratifications, but that success produces abundance, expanding leisure and the emancipation of appetites, all of which weaken capitalism's moral prerequisites.

The cultural contradictions of welfare states are comparable. Such states presuppose economic dynamism sufficient to generate investments, job-creation, corporate profits and individuals' incomes from which come tax revenues needed to fund entitlements. But welfare states produce in citizens an entitlement mentality and a low pain threshold.

The low pain threshold causes a ruinous flinch from the rigors, insecurities, uncertainties and dislocations inherent in the creative destruction of dynamic capitalism. The flinch takes the form of protectionism.

Twenty-five years ago, President Francois Mitterrand, a socialist who had won election by promising to "break with the logic of profitability," was keeping that promise and, in the process, killing socialism. He promised stimulative spending through expanded entitlements, a short work week with no reduced compensation, job-creation through public spending, and higher taxes on the investing classes. So productivity fell and unemployment — it has not been

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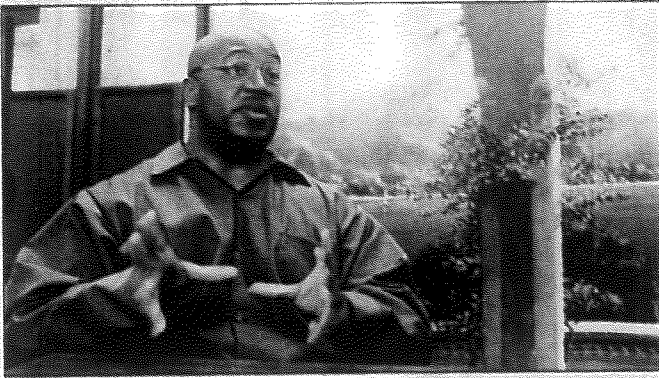
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